

LESBIAN ORGANIZATION OF TORONTO

HERSTORY

The herstory of LOOT goes back farther than we think. We must remember our roots and make our herstory now for those who will follow us.

From the first days, Lesbians were active and fighting; arguing and debating with gay men over the role of women in gay groups. From the first days of the recent women's movement, lesbians were putting forward their views within women's liberation. In the spring of 1971, the first public statement made by lesbians within the women's movement was at the Indo-Chinese Women's Liberation Conference here in Toronto. And let's not forget that 1971 was also the year of great turmoil within the American women's movement over the issue of lesbianism, leading to the formation of separate lesbian groups. Here, in Canada, lesbian autonomy was retarded by a different evolutionary process.

How many of us here know the following, each one being a step up on the way to LOOT? The group called the Women's Liberation Movement in Toronto was holding lesbian rap groups since the beginning of 1971. How many of us remember The Other Woman feminist newspaper which was first produced and sold by five lesbians in the spring of 1972? It was that first issue which caused a scandal among the feminist community by daring to print more than one article of interest to lesbians.

The Woman's Place began in the summer of 1972 as a centre for feminist organizing. Many members of LOOT came out as lesbians through involvement in the women's centre. But for those who were already lesbian, it was a struggle to maintain a separate identity. For about a year, we maintained a Friday night Lesbian Drop-In Centre and from this we developed rap groups. It was also at this time that the Toronto Sun was condemning the women's centre for being run by marxist-lesbians!

The first two Canadian lesbian conferences took place in Montreal in the winters of 1973 and 1974 co-ordinated by anglophone lesbians. Aside from these large events, it is time to reclaim our own local herstory. How many know that the first lesbian conference ever was held right here in Toronto in the summer of 1973 at the old YWCA

at 21 McGill St? Probably very few. Organized by lesbians from the Women's Place, it was one in a series of attempts to bring lesbians in Toronto together.

As the women's centre changed direction, a need was felt for a social space. Women signed a lease on 342 Jarvis St. in 1975 to open a coffeehouse but found too many problems and several lesbians moved into the house for the next year. During that winter of 1975, some frustrated lesbians opened the Three of Cups. Over the next year, the Three of Cups coffeehouse grew in popularity bringing us together and helping us to come out.

In all this time, the community in Toronto was growing and changing, even those lesbians more involved in gay liberation were experiencing change. In May of 1976, the women in the Kingston gay group held a conference on Women and the Gay Liberation Movement, at which the need for lesbian autonomy was being expressed. The National Gay Rights Coalition held their conference in Toronto that September and many lesbians caused a disturbance over the issue of feminism and sexism.

Immediately afterward, the newly-formed lesbian group in Ottawa (LOON) sponsored the first national conference with a political perspective, to bring together all the change in the last two years. Two women came from Toronto and handed out a leaflet describing the need for a space in Toronto for their lesbian identity. This one leaflet created both curiosity and excitement; it was time for something to happen.

Several Sundays later, the first meeting took place. Many ideas floated around; everybody wanted something--women's rock band, women's centre, lesbian centre, network to share information. After the second meeting, a 'task force' was set up to look for a physical space for the idea that was taking shape in our discussions. From this two years later we have our house, our idea called LOOT and we also have a women's rock band.

At the same time, the lease on this house was expiring and the present members of LOOT who had lived there for a year were moving out. Both The Other Woman newspaper and the Three of Cups were told of the opportunity to move into a better and more

permanent living space of their own. The problem was both time and money; it had to happen right away; so it did. Nobody had any money and yet we were taking on the burden of a \$300 house and all its gas bills.

But the lesbian group now had a name and the task force ran its first LotoLesbian ~~to~~ to meet its first rental payment in February for its office in our new lesbian centre. That was an incredibly hard winter; nobody was prepared for the gas bills, nevermind the rent. Our meetings were sometimes complete confusion over who pays what and whose duty it was to clean the house. The Other Woman newspaper closed down; we had to find more money to cover their rent. There was never enough time to plan for the future of our lesbian centre and where we wanted it to be going.

That May, LOOT's Counselling Service and the newsletter put the lesbian group into business. There was an Open House to introduce ourselves to other groups. All of the social events of LOOT--from dances to picnics--have been immensely successful in building a community for ourselves. The Task Force continued to meet as a co-ordinating body to look after finances and endless details while the phone-line built up the house from drop-ins and pot-luck suppers. Early on, the social committee grew out of the activity of running the drop-ins.

Finally, through benefits and t-shirt sales, the house was meeting the rent month by month. By the time of the first New Years Dance, we had managed to build a supportive environment for everyone and made our presence known in the city with an ever-growing mailing list. However, the political ~~action~~ action committee had continued to remain in the background through the fall, until LOOT decided to take part in the coalition against Anita Bryant that January. It was LOOT which made that protest such a success.

Our brunches, our concerts, dances, coffeehouses have all contributed to our lesbian identity but none of these will influence us by themselves. The discussion last spring on child sexuality from a lesbian viewpoint, the discussion on transsexuals are all responses to issues coming from outside the house. At the conference this weekend, we will be talking about what happens inside our community and inside our movement.